Masao Tom Inada

Tom and his sister, Betty

"That's the reason I've always just got to think to myself, I don't know what it is but everything happens to me by chance or coincidence. And I get spared."

Tom Inada believes that someone's been looking out for him. Despite some blight situations in which he might have found himself – jobless, a replacement in the highest casualty battalion in WWII or not meeting the right kind of woman who would become his wife – Tom seemed to luck out. And you can't help but feel like he's most deserving of his streak: He is one of the nicest people you'd ever meet.

Born and raised in Sacramento, Tom dabbled in artwork his entire life. Before the war broke out, he intended to go to art college in Los Angeles after teachers told him to cultivate his natural talent. But his aspirations were put on hold after his family was sent to Tule Lake. There, he worked for the camp newspaper in the art department and would eventually work as an artist for the U.S. army newspaper, Stars and Stripes.

Joining the military was a contentious decision: His father answered no/no on the loyalty questionnaire and wanted Tom to do the same. "I said I don't know anything about Japan and all I know is the United States, and so yes I'll be loyal to the United States, despite what they did." Tom was originally drafted as a replacement for the 442nd but was instead sent to Tokyo as a translator with the Military Intelligence Service after Japan's surrender.

Now at 95, Tom's crystal clear memory and impeccable physical condition betray his age. He's an avid bowler, golfer and continues to do his artwork in his home in the El Cerrito hills.

Can you paint me a picture of what your life was like before the war? Where were you living?

> I was born and raised in Sacramento, California. I graduated from the Sacramento Junior College and when I was going there I was taking an art course.

I was taking it with Mark Mizuguchi and Dick Kurihara, they were classmates. And the Kurihara family were close to us because the father was working for my father who had a fish market and he was working as a bookkeeper, so we were close. Dick Kurihara is about one or two years older than I am but our lives are similar in that we went to the same school, high school and all that. Actually, when the war happened and we were told to evacuate, my father had to get rid of all of his equipment for a dirt cheap price.

So he didn't have any friends that offered to keep the store?

Not to keep the store. There was a Caucasian friend that used to come to the store, I think he had some police connection and he offered to keep an eye on our home, and some of the stuff that he couldn't sell, he stored. He said that he would watch it for us. And I guess he rented the downstairs or something. I actually don't know what happened because I didn't get back to Sacramento after the evacuation. I got out of camp and landed in New York and found a job there.

My oldest sister, who is the famous one in the family, she was raised by my grandparents in Japan and she came back to California when she was about high school age. And she was interested in singing popular songs and all that. So at about age 17, she went to Los Angeles to try and get a recording at Columbia or something. I think she knew Ella Fitzgerald. She never did get a recording thing but did start a singing career in Japan. She would sing popular American songs and translate it into a Japanese and English version. Since my sister was raised in Japan she was quite fluent. And like I say, she's the oldest and so I don't know too much about her other than she did go to Japan.

Why was she in Japan originally?

I don't know why but I guess my father came to the U.S. when he was only 17, and worked around and was finally able to start a fish market, and I think he got married from a picture bride. My mother was from the same area in Japan. I guess because they weren't really established, the oldest one was kept in Japan, raised by the grandparents.

So you're in Sacramento and you were taking art classes. Is that what you wanted to do as a career?

Right. But when I graduated from Sacramento Junior College I felt, or my teacher told me, that I should continue going to L.A. where they have an art center which was more advanced but my plans were — then the war came. So all the time I felt I wasn't really accomplished as a graphic artist so when I went to show my portfolio they would say, "Oh it's not quite clear enough," and stuff like that. I guess I should tell you about getting out of camp.

Yes, so you were in Tule Lake. Did you end up there originally?

Yes right after the assembly center, we were sent by train to Tule Lake.

And you had to answer that loyalty questionnaire. And you answered yes/yes?

Uh huh, right.

And your whole family answered the same way?

No [*laughs*]. My family, I don't know if they went through that but I know I went through that questionnaire business because I was male, and those two questions: were you loyal to Japan or to the U.S. and would you be willing to fight for the U.S.?

Tom's sketch of Tule Lake.

My father was really influenced by the parents and all that. And the block manager, Mr. Sakayama had a son two years older than me and he had told his son to say no/no. And so my father naturally wanted me to say no/no. I told him I answered yes/yes and he said, "Why'd you do that?" We had an argument and I said I don't know anything about Japan and all I know is the United States, and so yes, I'll be loyal to the United States, despite what they did. That was really my first argument with my dad.

And was he upset with you for a while after that?

No I don't think so, but he made me promise that I would not volunteer. But if I was drafted, I would go. So when I got to Tule Lake I started to work for the Tulean Dispatch, newspaper. I was one of three people in the art staff, there was an art department. Everything was done on mimeograph,

and there would be space left above the story and we would have to cut the headlines, we would type up fonts for the style of lettering and we would have to trace on the mimeograph.

And that was all run by the Japanese Americans?

Tom's father, Yoshimatsu.

Yes, they had an all-Japanese section and English section on the paper. There was an editor for both. So as far as activities in Tule Lake camp, I didn't know too much about it because I would go work at the newspaper and come back. They had a recreation department and they had baseball and basketball teams. But I didn't know anything about that [*laughs*].

You were just focused on doing art.

On doing my job and coming home. Other than that in the evening maybe I would've gone to one or two dances.

How did you get out of camp? You said you went to New York.

Quite a few people that worked for the Dispatch said they wanted to get out, so they signed up to work on the farm or railroad. So a group of us signed up to get out. And my friends were all able to get out. And fortunately, I heard about Quakers. The Quakers offered a hostel for people to live while they looked for a job. I went to Cincinnati, and I stayed at the Quaker hostel and looked for a job. And while you were there you did housework, and they gave you board and room, no charge. Like I say, when I went to show my portfolio in Cincinnati, they'd say no, you're not quite finished [with art school] so I couldn't find anything.

And so there was a fellow from Sacramento also at the hostel and he had a sister in New York, married to a Japanese national. And they were never evacuated or anything so he said he was going to go to New York and he

asked me if I wanted to go. So we shared a bunk in New York. I was looking for a job there.

A rendering of Tokyo on May 22nd, 1946

And some kind of art job, right?

Yeah, art. I always think someone must be looking out for me because I was walking down New York, trying to find a job and this reporter that worked in the Dispatch was coming from the opposite direction and he recognized me and he called, “Hey Mas! You looking for a job?” And I say yeah. So he told me, “Well go call such and such at an animation cartoon studio that was situated in Florida just moved to New York. They’re looking for people. So if you’re interested why don’t you go over there?” Well, I didn’t know anything about animating. So I started from the bottom, which is called in-betweening.

In-betweening?

Everything in the animated cartoon was on two pegs and they lighted on the glass top with a light underneath and they had papers that fit on two pegs. And cellophane to fit underneath. And in-betweening is where they had an animator do the sketch for the story, and the action would be, maybe the character was raising its arm. So the animator would draw the action and to make the action smooth, they would want in-between the two.

Drawings between the two hands at every level?

Right. That was the lowest paying job there. And that studio made the Little Lulu character and Popeye the Sailor.

What was the name of the studio?

Famous Studios. And because I had some art training, they said well maybe you could do the rendering for the background scene. And that was twice the amount of salary that I got [*laughs*]. That's when I ended up doing the rendering of the backgrounds, worked for about two or three months. And then I got my draft notice.

And you were how old at this time?

Still 21.

So you were living in New York, with a great job, and then you got a draft notice in the mail. Do you remember what it said?

Well it said you're drafted and you're supposed to go to New Jersey or something for your physical and all that. They ask you questions about your background. They asked me, did you go to Japanese language school in Sacramento? I said yeah I did. I think I went up to about the 6th grade in Japanese. This was all on the record.

So then I was sent to Mississippi for basic training. After we finished basic

training we were lined up to embark for replacement for the 442nd. And then, so many names were called out and I was one of them. They told me that you guys are going to Fort Snelling, Minnesota for Military Intelligence. Well, like I say, because I said I was trained in Japanese school, I guess they have it on the record and so they sent me there. And then I heard from people in basic training, that two of my friends, on the landing in Europe, they got killed or hurt. We went to Fort Snelling and finished the course there. And from there we were sent to the Philippines.

When you were drafted, what was your feeling? Even though you said 'yes' you would serve, were you upset that you were going to leave your art career?

Well, you know, shikata ga nai [it can't be helped]. So that's what it is, and you can't fight it. But naturally I resented the fact that I just got a raise and all that, and get drafted.

I know. That would be hard.

Yeah, but just like anything else, you just accept it and try to make the best of it. Well, one thing came out of it. When I was in Fort Snelling, I had my three day pass. The only people I knew in Chicago was someone named Martha, who took the same art class. So I contacted her and asked if I could see her.

It's funny that I had a date with Martha and she told me how to get to her place and all that. And I got there, Martha comes out and says, "I'm sorry, I got the mumps." [*laughs*] So she said, why don't you take out my cousin, Yoshiko? So I said well, okay. So we had a first date and I remember going to one of those soda places. And I was always shy about talking to girls and stuff, but when I was talking with her, she was easy to talk to and so I figured, "Man, this is the first one that I, you know, could get along and talk freely." So, after I

got sent overseas, I asked her if I could correspond with her. That's what we were doing all the time while I was overseas. And I tell my grandkids, I must've been a pretty good letter writer because we more or less got engaged through correspondence.

So that was your wife?

Yeah [*laughs*].

That's a happy ending. That's amazing. You were just comfortable.

Yeah, I guess. I don't think she was shy with me because I know she dated other servicemen while she was in Chicago. She told me.

Were you the same age? 21?

Yeah, she's only two years younger.

I see. So then you landed in the Philippines.

Yeah. When we were in the Philippines, maybe about two or three weeks later, the war with Japan ended. So the very next day, myself and another desk sergeant who I knew, both of us were flown to Tokyo to Major Willoughby's headquarters, to translate newspapers.

When I got to Tokyo and was stationed at the Dai-Ichi building, I noticed there was a police station nearby and I knew my sister was quite famous as a singer, and she escaped during the war there, so I went to the station and asked if she could locate Fumiko Betty Inada and told them that I was working at the Dai-Ichi building. And the very next day a guy comes up and says, "Hey, you got a visitor downstairs." And I go down there and there she was with Dick Mine. She had been singing with Dick Mine's band all through her career. I guess since she was well-known, they located her right away.

When was the last time you saw each other?

The last time I saw her was before she went to Japan. And like I say, because

of our age difference, I don't know too much about her or anything. My sister, two years older than myself, she was the closest to her.

So Betty was okay during the war?

She was safe. She used to say that she got so used to the air raid siren when the planes came over — she liked to bake and stuff — so she got to the point where she wouldn't go into the shelter, she'd just draw the curtain down so that no lights would show. And then got the point where she didn't care.

It was just happening so much. So she came to the building where you were working?

So she says, "Whenever you are off duty and have free time, come to her place." So, got to the point where a bunch of us from Sacramento would go to Betty's apartment in the evenings.

Tom Inada's sketch of Tokyo and the Diet building, from the perspective of his sister Betty's apartment.

And what was your day-to-day in Tokyo, and what were you doing for work?

Our first duty was there at Willoughby's headquarters, and then after you finished there, they had us with the ATIS, Allied Translator Interpreter Group or Section, where all the translators would go and work and translate documents or whatever they had, just to kill time. And then if you got assigned to certain places, you'd go out. The only assignment I had got while I was there was to the First Cavalry Division, Hiratsuka, they needed an interpreter, and that's where I went. But meanwhile, before being sent, I was translating medical documents or something like that every day. So I learned all about encephalitis [*laughs*].

And why did the U.S. government want those translated?

I don't know what use those medical things were. Just to keep us occupied I guess. All these [American] officers, they were looking for Japanese swords as souvenirs, they'd just ride around in the jeep and go to police stations where they kept those swords. So as far as the interpreting, it was okay, but we didn't have translating or anything to do.

They just needed you to be there so there was an Allied presence.

Yes, in case the officers wanted us to interpret something or other.

So you're fluent in reading and writing in Japanese?

I could recognize Japanese characters, some of them. But we had a Japanese kanji dictionary which I kept when I got out of the army. I still have it. So you could find a character that you don't know how to read, there's a way of looking at it and it gives you the meaning and all that. I referred to that quite often.

Tom's original Kanji dictionary provided by the army.

So would you say most of you in the MIS were pretty much the same level? In reference to being able to translate and all that?

No. Most of them at the time that I went to MIS were pretty close. But the earlier ones, especially the Kibei, they were the good ones. So you know, when I think about it, I belonged to MIS but didn't see any action or anything like that. I just don't feel like you did much of anything.

Do you feel somewhat lucky though, because of how many casualties there were in the 442nd?

Yeah. That's the reason I've always just gotta think to myself, I don't know what it is but everything happens to me by chance or coincidence. And I get spared.

So you were in Japan for how long?

Tom and Yoshiko in Chicago.

I wrote Yoshiko that I would take a civil service job for a year to spend time with [my sister] and get to know her. So I took my army discharge and then I worked for the federal government in civil service and got a job with the Stars and Stripes army newspaper in the art department. So that was when my year contract with the government was up and I told my officer, he was the editor. He was the head man. I said, my contract is up so I'll go back to the States. He said, "Oh, you're stupid, you can't find a job like this back home now." "I've got a girl waiting for me. That's the reason why I'm going home" [*laughs*].

And were you keeping in touch with your family?

They had gone back to Sacramento. My father wanted to go back to Japan from Tule Lake but the rest of the family said no, they're not going back. So they moved to Granada, Colorado and in fact, they were already there and when I was going overseas, we were allowed to visit them. My father changed his mind and he was able to go to Granada. Then my youngest sister, and my father and mother went back to Sacramento. And my father bought into a partnership with a family and started a soda fountain business, or snack shop.

And the house was taken care of?

The house was still there.

That's very rare.

Yeah, I guess it was a deputy sheriff. I guess he kept his word.

And so you did you work at the shop?

No, I was still in Japan. So when my contract was over, I came back and I must've stayed about a month or so in Sacramento and then I told my

parents I was going to get married in Chicago. So we had a wedding, my father and my sister who was in New York came to the wedding.

You said you got engaged through your letters. Was there something that made you want to ask her, or did you just know from the very beginning?

Yeah, I think so. Because I was pretty faithful.

Tom Inada in his El Cerrito home of over 60 years.

How did you end up back in California after Chicago?

My son David was born in Chicago, and when he was about five years old, we decided we'd go back to California. So we drove back in a 1956 Chevrolet, I think I had. We drove cross country and went by way of Santa Maria. Yoshiko's father had been the minister at the Methodist Church there from before the war, so he had been there for 25 years. So Yoshiko, David and myself drove there on the way back, first time I met my father-in-law. I think my wife told me, "My father says you're too quiet" [*laughs*].

And did you have any other children?

I had another son, Rick. And now I have four great-grandchildren. People ask me what is my greatest accomplishment in life, and I say my family.

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